



## Leptospirosis

### What is Leptospirosis?

- Leptospirosis is a common zoonotic diseases, i.e. a disease that can be spread from animals to humans.
- It is a systematic infection by one of more than 200 serotypes of the spirochaete (**bacteria** with a spiral or corkscrew shape) *Leptospira interrogans*.
- Mild infections are often confused with “influenza” and asymptomatic cases of Leptospirosis are common.
- The incubation period is a few days to 3 weeks after infection.
- Typical symptoms are fever, muscle aches and fatigue.
- Severe and often fatal Leptospirosis infections are referred to as Weil’s disease, where the symptoms are jaundice, kidney and liver failure and haemorrhages.

### How is Leptospirosis transmitted?

- Wild animals, such as rodents are the natural hosts of Leptospirosis, in which case the spirochaeta is excreted in the urine of the infected animal. Domestic animals can act as intermediate hosts, when infected by wild animals.
- Humans can contract this disease by:
  - ✓ Skin contact with animal urine, e.g. through an open skin wound or eyes.
  - ✓ Ingestion of contaminated water, food or moist soil.
- Leptospirosis is a common occupational infection in e.g., miners, rice farmers, water sport enthusiasts, sugar cane workers, veterinarians, sewer workers or anyone working in a watery environment that is contaminated with rodent urine.
- Spirochaetes can live in fresh water or moist soil for several months, but are eradicated by drought.

### How can Leptospirosis patients be treated?

- Leptospirosis is not easily suspected or diagnosed, except in severe cases as in Weil’s disease. It should be suspected if fever occurs in patients that had close contact with rodents.
- Specific antibiotics are available to combat infections.
- Most patients recover, but professional clinical follow-up examinations are recommended as symptoms can linger for many years.

### How can Leptospirosis be prevented?

- Avoid skin contact with contaminated water, especially when you have an open skin wound. Wear protective clothing in contaminated water.
- Rodent control and proper hygiene and sanitation in food storage areas.
- Prevent water contamination by fencing of recreational aquatic areas.
- Do not drink contaminated water before disinfecting it with domestic bleach.

Reference: DWAF (2003). Management of water-related microbial diseases, RSA

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